

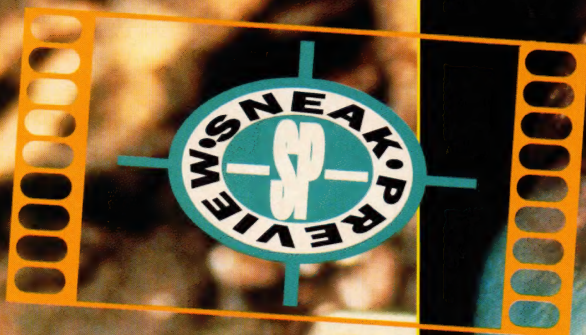
# THE LAUGHING DEAD

Tex Mex zombies are on the prowl south of the border in this month's Sneak Preview, *The Laughing Dead*. VW spoke to the film's writer and director S.P. Somtow, and discovered that *The Laughing Dead* has a lot more gore than giggles.





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Laugh? You'll nearly die when you step into 'A New Dimension In Horror' with *The Laughing Dead*, the story of a bus load of tourists who go on an educational tour to Mexico to study the ancient way of the Aztecs and Mayas only to find that the ride turns into an advanced course in terror, as one by one they fall victim to zombified corpses with murder in mind.

Really no laughing matter, the film is the brainchild of S. P. Somtow, renowned 'Splatterpunk' author of such bestselling horror novels as *Moondance*, *Vampire Junction* and *Mall World*. He describes his debut movie as a 'Mayon/New Age/Exorcist/Slasher shocker, containing elements of everything from *Night Of The Living Dead* to *Night Of The Iguana*.' Whether it lives up to that claim or not, we can tell from the pics that *The Laughing Dead* has enough guts and gore in it to be top of our viewing list!





and pre-Colombian religions - with people dressed as skeletons running through the streets and celebrants feasting over the graves of their ancestors. After reading several books on the culture of the ancient Mayans, he set to work on writing a screenplay that could be produced for the modest sum of less than \$25,000, peanuts by Hollywood standards.

According to Somtow: "We knew that this would be a film put together entirely by networking, just like those old Judy Garland movies where the kids get together and say, 'I've got a barn, let's put on a show.'"

With this in mind he called up a bunch of his friends who he thought might be able to act, if prodded hard enough. Among these were science-fiction author Ed Bryant (who came like a shot when he heard he was to have his head crushed!) and noted collector and horror fan, Forry J. Ackerman - who does a cameo as a corpse.

Initially, Somtow planned to let his good friend Wendy Ikeguchi direct the

Among the delights on offer: a full grown baby bursting gruesomely out of its mother's womb, an arm being ripped off and being stuffed down somebody's throat, a head being squashed like a ripe tomato under the wheels of a bus, a graphic wrenching out of a human heart (still beating, naturally) and a head being sliced off and thrown through a basketball hoop. Okay, so maybe it *is* a comedy after all!

The core of the storyline deals with a disillusioned priest, Father O'Sullivan, who is obsessed with the memory of a nun with whom he once made love. The nun became pregnant and fled her convent and her vows. Twelve years later they meet again, seemingly by accident but this is no accident as is revealed in the twisty climax.

The priest is obsessed with Mayan and Aztec rituals and is transporting a small group of students to the town of Oaxaca to take part in the annual Festival Of The Dead. Things get very weird when the nun and her son join the bus, along with two other mysterious figures dressed in Mayan

costumes (who vanish when accosted, but return to enfold the group in an evil aura). After a number of gory murders, the survivors must band together to save their very souls against an army of Mexican zombies, in a battle that will decide the fate of humanity.

The concept of this low budget thriller was first brought to the boil under very strange circumstances. 'I was in a shopping mall', S.P. Somtow explains, 'standing in line waiting to see *Harry And The Hendersons* and I got into a conversation with a man in front of me who turned out to be make-up FX artist John Beuchler. A day or two later, John called me and said, "My production manager's a big fan of your book, *Vampire Junction*." He then invited me down to his studio to look at all of his toys. Then he asked me to write a script for him to direct.'

Somtow immediately decided to set this script in Oaxaca, Mexico, home of the festival of 'Dea de los Muertos' - The Day Of The Dead, a strange blend of Catholicism





film. She was an assistant director on the TV series *The Days And Nights Of Molly Wood* and knew all about the technical aspects of film-making. But Wendy was a member of the Director's Guild and the small production company couldn't afford her union rates. So Somtow took the logical decision of deciding to direct it himself, with Wendy unofficially on hand to tell him if he was making any mistakes.

The other prime mover in the project apart from Somtow was the aforementioned John Buechler, the noted special effectsman whose work on productions like *Ghoulies* and the *Freddy and Friday* *13th* series have made him into something of a superstar in the genre. Buechler offered to do the effects for *The Laughing Dead* at a reduced rate, saying that he thought the script was excellent - both disturbing and funny. Buechler also persuaded Somtow to take an acting role, playing the evil Dr. Um-Tzec, creator of *The Laughing Dead* and all-round nasty fella!

When shooting got underway in Tucson, Arizona, the first day saw Somtow dressed in full Um-Tzec regalia atop a towering mountain and about to plunge a knife into

his helpless niece Vanina, who was playing victim number one. Having removed his glasses for the scene, Somtow promptly tripped and fell down the mountainside, spraining his ankle in the process. It wasn't an auspicious start, but as Somtow explained to one of the crew, "I shouldn't have tried to play a god with out making the appropriate blood sacrifice, now that my foot is bleeding onto the earth, everything will be okay."

The movie took a gruelling 19 days to shoot, a great deal of it on imaginative sets specially constructed by the team of Diane Hughes and Phillip Vasels. 'Most of my script was set during the warm tropical night', says Somtow, 'but the real temperature in Tucson in the middle of the night was below freezing. The actors who played Um-Tzec evil acolytes suffered in particular because they had to stand around in their skimpy costumes in this biting desert wind!'

There were also some problems with the FX. One of the biggest involved the crushing of actor Ed Bryant's head under the wheels of a bus. The first time round the head was squashed flat, but the blood balloons failed

to burst. 'We all thought the head had been ruined,' groans Somtow. 'But then we watched in astonishment as it popped right back into shape the moment the bus pulled away. No-one had even dreamed that the head would be reusable.'

Despite a variety of traumas, the film was eventually completed and 'sneak previewed' at an American horror festival to an audience of enthusiastic fans. 'They laughed at all the jokes,' says Somtow, 'applauded all the gore and seemed to have a pretty good time. It wasn't *Ben Hur 2*, but we had done what 90 percent of those who come to Hollywood never manage: We had actually *finished* a movie.'

But of course finishing a movie is not as easy as getting it distributed and though *The Laughing Dead* has been released on video in the States, it has been sitting around for a while awaiting a UK release. However, as of time of writing we have just learnt that the film has been signed up by Colourbox and should be out around September. If the movie itself is as good as these gory pics then we're sure they'll have a hit on their hands. You could say they'll be laughing all the way to the bank...

